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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

SUCCESS STORY

Job Training Changes Young Lives

USAID provides vocational training so youth in crisis can rebuild their lives and return to society.



Photo by USAID

When 17-year old Prasanna got caught stealing, his mother was very worried that she had lost him. Now after two years in the program, he is taking more responsibility for his actions and making good choices.

As a result of the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka, poverty, lack of access to education, family migration, abuse and crime, children at risk find themselves in difficult situations. USAID's support ensures that job skills training is one component of their treatment and rehabilitation.

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As the seven boys walked quickly to the front of the small, hot auditorium, it was difficult for them to believe they were completing their job skills training program and returning home with their families.

It also seemed like a miracle to the families gathered at the Hikkaduwa Government Certified School. During the past two years, anxious mothers and fathers had watched their sons shed the bad behavior that had gotten them into trouble with the police, and replace that rebelliousness with an attitude of responsibility and the job skills needed to succeed in the working world. Now their sons were coming home.

There are currently more than 21,000 children living in 488 voluntary residential care institutions and 22 state-run residential institutions in Sri Lanka. While most voluntary homes have good facilities, many of the state-run institutions cannot provide adequate care and education, and there is limited job training for children.

To tackle this problem, USAID granted \$2.6 million to support children who are placed in government institutions and private voluntary homes. Many children receive stiff penalties for very minor offences, often prompted by extreme family poverty and instability.

This six-year program, *New Beginnings for Children Affected by Conflict and Violence*, is implemented by Save the Children in Sri Lanka (SCiSL). Since 2005, it has reunited 950 children with their families and prevented more than 700 children from being placed in institutions away from their families when other community-based alternatives were more appropriate. *New Beginnings* is also expanding to Eastern Sri Lanka, where it will prevent family separation and support reunification.

New Beginnings also goes a step further and helps young people learn trades so they can get jobs and become financially independent. As part of a pilot program, these young men received training from local vocational centers and on-the-job experience with businesses in the community, extending training options and providing more realistic job experience for students.

January 26, 2009



All smiles, Ranjith and his father prepare to return to their small village.

For 17-year-old Ranjith, participating in the *New Beginnings* training program changed his life. As the fifth and youngest child, Ranjith often disobeyed his parents and hung out with friends who were not good role models. “He skipped school all the time and got into trouble around town,” said his father, a small business owner. “Coming to this school and learning a trade was good for him because now all the bad behavior is gone.” Ranjith studied tailoring and plans to work at a tailor shop in his hometown, an example of the program’s efforts to reintegrate young people back into their communities.

The story is much the same for Prasanna, also 17, who got caught stealing several times in his community. “I was very worried about him,” said his mother, a housewife from Anuradhapura. “He has been here for two years, and it is too far from my home to visit him very often. But I have seen him change a lot during this time, and now I know he is ready to return to society.” Prasanna studied tailoring, but he has decided to join the army.

Some of the program’s most successful efforts have come through training programs for probation officers and magistrates that raise awareness of the issue and help identify community and home-based alternatives to placing children in institutions. And with more than 21,000 children living away from home, having more options for youth in crisis is good news.